

Gifted Education and the NZ Curriculum: Overview

The **New Zealand Curriculum/Marautanga o Aotearoa** acknowledges the particular needs of gifted and talented learners. For example, the Principles, the foundations of curriculum decision making, are based on the assertion that students “... should experience a curriculum that engages and challenges them” (Ministry of Education, 2007, p. 9). The New Zealand Curriculum is designed to allow for flexibility of application so that the needs of diverse learners can be appropriately responded to. This is fundamental to providing a learning environment that is commensurate with the abilities, interests and needs of the gifted and talented.

All of the **Principles** that underpin the New Zealand Curriculum are applicable to the education of gifted and talented students, but the following have particular relevance:

- **High expectations.** Gifted and talented students have the potential to achieve to advanced levels. A curriculum that places a low ceiling on their potential to achieve can result in boredom and frustration and may lead to underachievement.
- **Treaty of Waitangi.** Māori students remain underrepresented amongst those identified as gifted and talented. A key to redressing this inequity is for schools and teachers to develop a greater understanding and appreciation of how Māori conceptualise giftedness and talent. This should lead to culturally appropriate approaches to identification and curriculum differentiation.
- **Inclusion.** The curriculum is designed to ensure that “... students’ identities, languages, abilities, and talents are recognised and affirmed and that their learning needs are addressed” (p. 9). Gifted and talented students are disadvantaged when it is perceived that their exceptionality guarantees their success and/or that any dedicated provisions are unnecessary or equitable. The specific needs of the gifted and talented are no less deserving than those of any other group.
- **Coherence.** Recognition of prior learning is necessary to achieve curriculum coherency for gifted and talented students. The curriculum does not impose or imply limitations on student progress on the basis of age or class level. It allows for accelerated learning but, to achieve coherency of progression, teachers must recognise what a student has previously achieved.

The New Zealand Curriculum identifies a core set of **Values** to be encouraged, modelled, and explored. The following Values have particular relevance to gifted and talented learners:

- **Excellence.** The gifted and talented have the potential for excellence in their area(s) of special ability. This has implications for teacher expectations and classroom practice which will invariably require some differentiation of approach.
- **Innovation, inquiry, and curiosity.** Many gifted and talented learners are inherently creative, inquisitive and have a thirst for knowledge. The curriculum allows for the pursuit of individual interests and independence of inquiry.
- **Equity.** Gifted and talented students frequently take an interest in moral and ethical issues in advance of their same-age peers. This often translates into

an atypical concern with matters of social justice. A curriculum that allows for the development of moral reasoning and offers opportunities to take social responsibility is particularly relevant for this group of students.

The New Zealand Curriculum lists five **Key Competencies** or capabilities for living and lifelong learning: Thinking, Using Language, Symbols, and Texts, Managing Self, Relating to Others, and Participating and Contributing. Each of the Key Competencies is a goal in itself but these are also recognised as dynamic and opportunities should be provided for these competencies to develop over time and across settings. In this context, it is important to recognise that gifted and talented students may differ socially and emotionally from their peers. This has implications for teacher expectations and opportunities related to the development of the intrapersonal and interpersonal competencies.

The New Zealand Curriculum identifies as **Effective Pedagogy** a set of teacher actions to promote effective learning. These are relevant for all learners, including the gifted and talented, and are appropriately flexible to be adapted to meet diverse needs. However, any singular response to incorporating these actions will inevitably disadvantage some students or groups of students. For example, **the creation of a supportive environment** for gifted and talented students may require the inclusion of provisions, such as mentoring or acceleration, which may not be necessary or appropriate for others. Similarly, **enhancing the relevance of new learning** may look quite different for gifted and talented students, who often have an advanced capacity for engaging with abstract ideas and may be more tolerant of conceptual dissonance. While **facilitating shared learning** is a commendable goal, some gifted and talented students have a preference for independent learning and an emphasis on shared or cooperative learning can constrain their levels of achievement. These examples illustrate the importance of teachers being conversant with the needs of individual learners and tailoring any initiatives designed to promote effective learning accordingly.

The primary purpose of **Assessment** is to improve learning and teaching. This requires ongoing approaches to assessment that provide valid insights into the progress of individual students. For gifted and talented learners, some forms of assessment will contain achievement 'ceilings' that can mask their true ability. Although these students may achieve to the highest point on an assessment tool, interpreting this as the indication of their ability level may be spurious, as their real ability may be well beyond this point. Another consideration in this regard is the tendency of creatively gifted students to think divergently. Many approaches to assessment 'reward' convergent responses and, as a consequence, can disadvantage students who tend to think 'beyond the square'.